



A Proposed Alliance Between the Order of Malta and the United States, 1794: Suggestions Made to James Monroe as American Minister in Paris

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# A PROPOSED ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE ORDER OF MALTA AND THE UNITED STATES, 1794

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SUGGESTIONS MADE TO JAMES MONROE AS AMERICAN  
MINISTER IN PARIS

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By EDGAR ERSKINE HUME

What might the subsequent course of American and of European history have been if a proposed treaty between the Order of Malta and the United States had been made at the end of the eighteenth century? Certainly there was much to be gained by both governments. American ships, like those of other Christian nations, were then the prey of the Barbary pirates. Malta would have afforded them a base and place of safety, and perhaps active assistance against the pirates might have been given by the Knights. On the other hand the foreign affairs of the Order were in a precarious condition and in distant America a place of refuge would have been of great worth.

To-day the average American thinks of the Hospitallers or the Order of Malta as having existed long ago but now only a memory, perpetuated chiefly in romantic novels such as those of Sir Walter Scott. The island of Malta is now a British possession which figures in American newspapers when there is some political difficulty between the Governor and the inhabitants, or when the British fleet in the Mediterranean is in the public eye. Or perhaps from time to time one reads brief accounts of ceremonies in which the Knights of Malta figure. The Order was not always so little known in this country.

When the American colonies were struggling for their independence, the *Sovereign Military Order of the Hospitallers of Saint John of Jerusalem*, commonly called the *Knights of Malta*, to give the Order its full title, was rounding out the two hundred and fiftieth year of its occupation of the island of Malta.

The exact date of its origin is lost in the mists of time. Founded at the period of the first Crusade by the merchants of Amalfi who obtained permission from the Caliphs of Egypt to erect a hospital in the Christian quarter of Jerusalem (between A. D. 1014 and 1070), the Order from its inception undertook the care of the poor and the sick.

Following the vicissitudes of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, the Order maintained its see in the Holy Land until 1291, when the Grand Master established it in the island of Cyprus. In 1310 it was transferred to the island of Rhodes, to the conquest of which from the Unbelievers the Order had contributed greatly.

The Knights now became known as the Knights of Rhodes. After years of constant sea warfare and having gloriously defeated the Turks in the famous sieges of 1310 and in 1480, the Hospitallers were finally forced to surrender their island in 1522, though inflicting a loss of 90,000 on the Turkish force of 200,000 men. They left with the honors of war, taking with them their arms, flags and artillery, and their most precious relic, the hand of St. John the Baptist, and with the agreement that the inhabitants of Rhodes should be allowed religious freedom. European states owed an ill acknowledged debt of gratitude to the Order for the postponement by two centuries of the Turkish rise to first-rate naval power in the Mediterranean. After several temporary halts, the Knights entered on their possession of Malta, the Emperor Charles V having given them feudal rights to this and adjacent islands, a gift which received the approval of Pope Clement VII. From this time, 1530, forth, the Order has been popularly known as the *Order of Malta*.

Warfare between the Knights and the Muslims continued without cease. In 1551 an attack by the Arabs was repulsed. In 1565 a Turkish force of 30,000 men was defeated, and finally in 1641 the last great Turkish siege of Malta failed and thenceforth the Order's wars against the Infidel were carried into the enemy's country, being chiefly naval in character. The Order in those days was able to devote its energies not only to the care of the poor and sick but to the active naval warfare for which it was so famous. Its great galleys were at once a terror to the enemy and a comfort to the ships of Christendom. Its consuls in Egypt and Jerusalem watched over the interest of pilgrims.

Admission to the Order was exceedingly difficult. It was necessary to prove sixteen quarterings of nobility, the *seize quartiers* so often mentioned in history. That is, to be a Knight, it was necessary to offer proofs that each of the applicant's sixteen great-great-grandparents was noble, though this rule varied somewhat in the different branches of the Order. Besides this the fees were quite large. But aristocratic families took pride in the number of their sons who could be admitted to the Order of Malta, and so there was no shortage of noblemen desiring to enter its ranks, vows of celibacy and all. The serving brothers and the chaplains, while being required to be of good character, had not to prove nobility of birth.

After the Order settled in Rhodes, the Grand Master divided it into eight *Langues* or *tongues*, in order to provide for simpler administration of the Knights of different nations. The eight *langues*, were: Provence, Auvergne, France, Italy, Aragon, England, Germany (including Bohemia) and Castile. The *langues* were

quartered separately, and each was administered by its own venerable prior, all owing allegiance to the Grand Master who held office for life. The Knights themselves were either Knights of the Grand Cross or Knights of the Small Cross, the former being promoted from the latter for service rendered. Sometimes the Order would admit a man who could not fulfill the strict requirements. These were the *Chevaliers de Grâce Magistrale*. There were also the serving brothers, below the knightly rank. These could not wear the eight-pointed cross of the Order—the cross that is everywhere known by the Order's name—but had only a cross of six points. Much later there were added grades that did not require the vows of celibacy.

The Order had many vicissitudes. When the Order of the Temple was suppressed by the Pope in 1312, the vast property of that discredited brotherhood was added to the already extensive possessions of their rivals the Hospitallers. The English *langue* received a deadly blow when Henry VIII of England, for all that he was Defender of the Faith, broke with the Pope. That monarch proclaimed himself the head of the Order of Saint John in England, and to the rich harvest that he reaped by the seizure of the monasteries, he added the enormous English properties of the Knights. Thenceforth the English *langue* existed in name only. There were other inevitable disagreements with this sovereign or that, though in general it managed to remain friendly to all countries except Turkey, the hereditary enemy. But the Order survived all shocks, the loss of Rhodes, the Reformation, and the rest, because it had strong able rulers, and because its revenues were great. Through it all the ancient Order continued to be the best training school for land and sea warfare in all Europe, and those who had won their laurels in its service were often called to the highest command in the armies and galleys of the great Christian monarchs, subject always to the call of their Grand Master.

One of the great naval figures of the eighteenth century was one of these officers, Pierre-André de Suffren de Saint-Tropez. A Bailli of the Order and sometime its Ambassador at the court of His Most Christian Majesty, Suffren was, early in 1778, appointed General of the Galleys of the Order, by the Grand Master. This high office he relinquished to serve under Admiral de Grasse in the American War. The Count de Grasse himself was a Knight of the Order of Malta, as were not a few of the other French officers who served in the American Revolution. Among them were: the Count de Colbert-Maulevrier, Admiral de Sambucy, Commander d'Espinouse, the Marquis de Castellane-Majestre, Brigadier the Chevalier de Gras-Préville, the Chevalier de Vallongue, the Count de Langéron, the two Counts de Lameth, the Viscount de Noailles

(brother-in-law of LaFayette), the Viscount de Mirabeau, the Chevalier de Luzerne, first French Minister to the United States, and others. All of these officers became in 1783 original members of the Society of the Cincinnati, or *Ordre de Cincinnatus*, as it was known in France, the hereditary order to which certain officers were eligible who had served in the American War of Independence.

The French Knights of the Order of Malta had always been more numerous than those of any other nation. Of the 76 Grand Masters, 38 have been French, 13 Italian, 13 Spanish, 3 Portuguese, and one each from England, Bavaria, Russia and Austria. The nationality of 5 is uncertain. The prestige of the French *langues*, and their wealth was enormous—5 millions of *livres* a year. This was a factor in the Order's undoing. The French Revolution gravely affected the Hospitallers. In 1790 the Republic confiscated the Order's properties in France, and in the following year, under pain of losing their civil rights, forbade all Frenchmen belonging to the Order or wearing its decoration. In 1792 the possessions of the Knights in France were ordered sold, though certain of their pensions were continued. A commission was appointed to treat with the Order concerning the sum to be paid annually by France towards the upkeep of the Hospital at Malta, and for the succor given by the Order to French vessels. The future began to look dark indeed for the Knights of Malta, for France sought also to have their possessions in other lands sequestered. The French victories in Italy resulted in the Order's dispossession in that country as well.

The Viscount de Mirabeau did what he could to help the Order of Malta by writing a pamphlet, *Considérations pour l'Ordre*—it was the day of political pamphleteering. It is not without interest to recall that the Vicomte's brother, Honoré, Count de Mirabeau, was at that very time opposing all hereditary orders, including the Order of Malta and the Order of the Cincinnati, for all that the younger brother was a member of both. The elder Mirabeau's hostile *Considérations sur l'Ordre Américain de Cincinnatus*, makes interesting reading alongside of his brother's pamphlet defending the Order of Malta. While the one brother was predicting the downfall of the American Republic if the Cincinnati were not abolished, the other brother foretold serious consequences if the Order of Malta should be driven by financial straits into ceding Malta to the enemies of France. History has shown which brother was right.

It was at this juncture that the Maltese Embassy in Paris opened negotiations with Colonel James Monroe, the American Minister. The future President of the United States had many

friends and fellow members of the *Ordre de Cincinnatus* among the Knights of the Order of Malta, and before long was to play a leading part in the purchase of Louisiana. Perhaps his ideas about the transfer of territory were sensed even then. To Minister Monroe, the Chargé d'Affaires of Malta, Commander de Cibon, wrote as follows:

1794

The Chargé d'Affaires of Malta, has the honour to communicate to Mr. Monroe, Minister plenipotentiary of the United States of America, the *annexed reflections*, and to request that he will be pleased to weigh them in his mind, and give him frankly the result.

Mr. Cibon seizes this occasion to renew to Mr. Monroe an assurance of the respect and attachment with which he is, &c.

If there are nations who by their position, their industry, and their courage, become naturally opposed to, and rivals of each other; so there are other nations who with as much courage and industry, feel a motive to esteem, approach and unite together, to increase their mutual prosperity, and to render themselves reciprocally happy by a continual exchange of attentions, regards and services.

The United States of America and the Island of Malta, notwithstanding the distance which separates them, do not appear to be less bound to cultivate a close and friendly union between them, by motives of interest, than they are by those of a benevolent amity.

It is principally towards the Mediterranean that the American sailors, guided by their industry, present themselves in great numbers, forgetting the danger to which they are exposed of becoming a prey to the Algerine corsairs who cover that sea.

The Island of Malta, placed in the centre of the Mediterranean, between Africa and Sicily, offers by its position to all navigators, an asylum, provisions and succour of every kind. Of what importance would it not be for the American commerce to find upon this stormy sea, fine ports, provisions, and even protection against the Algerine pirates.

In exchange for the succours and protection, by means whereof the American vessels might navigate the Mediterranean freely and without inquietude, would the United States consent to grant, in full right, to the Order of Malta some lands in America, in such quantity as might be agreed on between the two governments, placing such lands under the immediate protection and safeguard of the American loyalty?

Thus the commerce of the United States would find, in the Mediterranean, ports to secure it from storms, and vessels of war to protect it against the pirates of Algiers; in exchange for which

Malta would possess in America property granted forever, protected by the United States, and guaranteed by them in a manner the most solid.

To this letter Monroe replied:

To the Chargé d'Affaires of Malta.

Paris, 22d November, 1794.

Citizen,—

I have received with great pleasure the considerations you were pleased to present to me; pointing out the mode by which the United States of America and the Isle of Malta may be serviceable to each other. It is the duty of nations to cultivate, by every means in their power, these relations subsisting between them, which admit of reciprocal good offices, and I am persuaded the United States will omit no opportunity which may occur to testify that disposition towards the Island of Malta.

The Americans have, it is true, received already great injury from the Algerines, and it is their intention to adopt such measures as shall prevent the like in future. The Island of Malta by its situation and maritime strength possesses the means of yielding that protection, and your suggestion on that subject merits, in my opinion, the serious consideration of our government, to whom I have already transmitted it.

The United States possess at present extensive and very valuable territory. It is their intention to dispose of it by sale; by which however the right of soil only will be conveyed; the jurisdiction still remaining with them. The government too of such territory is already prescribed: It must be elective or republican, and forming a part of the existing national system. I have thought proper to add this information that you may know the powers of our government in relation to this object. Permit me to assure you, that as soon as I shall be instructed thereon, I will immediately communicate the same to you. (Writings of Monroe, 1899, II, 128.)

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No record has been found of any instructions on the subject of the suggestion of the Order of Malta, ever having been sent to Monroe, and there the record ends. This was, however, not the first time the Order had sought to establish a foothold in the New World. It played an important part in the early history of Canada. It has even been said that it was intended to establish the Order in New France as the controlling interest in the Colony, if not its actual proprietor. An effort was made to establish a priory of the Order in Acadia as early as 1635 and the present



site of Halifax was chosen for a naval station. In 1637, Brulart de Sillery, a noted Knight of Malta, founded near Quebec, a chapel, convent, hospital, and dwellings for converted Indians, the money coming from his commandery at Troyes. It is not impossible, though the record is not clear, that a commandery was actually established at Quebec. A stone in the archway of the Chateau Frontenac bears the cross of Saint John and the date 1647, and around this stone has been woven the romance, too long to be recounted here, of the establishment of a priory of the Knights.

De Montmagny, Champlain's successor as Governor, may have worked in conjunction with de Poincy, Governor General of the French West Indies and de Razilly, Governor of Acadia, all being Knights of Malta. De Poincy had fortified the island of St. Kitts and had built several war ships. He was supported by the Grand Master of the Order of Malta, and as a result of negotiations with the King of France, the islands of St. Kitts, St. Croix and others were purchased in 1653 by the Order for £5,000. De Poincy died shortly thereafter and the islands were sold to a company of merchants in 1665. This seems the only time that the Sovereign Order of Malta actually established itself in the western world by the possession of territory. In 1733 the island of St. Croix and others were purchased by Denmark and in turn were sold to the United States in 1916. Thus, while the Order of Malta never acquired any territory from the United States, the United States now possesses territory that once belonged to the Order of Malta. (Cf. Canadian First Aid, Nov., 1933.)

The fate of the Order of Malta is quickly told. Fearing that France would be able to destroy it utterly, it took the step which proved the final cause of the loss of its territory. It accepted the protection offered by Paul I, Tsar of Russia, by treaty of 1797. A copy of the treaty fell into the hands of General Bonaparte. Russia was the ally of Great Britain, and both were the enemies of France. Here was a means by which the island of Malta could pass into British hands, and be made a naval base for operations against France. Napoleon charged the commanding general of the Army of the Orient with the duty of seizing Malta, provided this did not endanger his other operations.

There were at this time—the figures are Napoleon's—eight or nine hundred knights at Malta, some fifteen to eighteen thousand troops and less than a thousand militia, an effective force of perhaps eighteen thousand men in all. But the ancient strength of the Order from its international character, was now a source of weakness. There were many French knights and French soldiers, and these could not be expected to fight against their own country.



The final pretext for attacking Malta was Grand Master Hompesch's refusal to violate the Order's rule that not more than four warships of a belligerent nation could be in port at Malta at the same time. This would, thought Bonaparte, give Lord Nelson an advantage over him in the landing of his troops in Egypt. Therefore military operations against Malta were commenced on June 10, 1798. The bombardment was brief but effective, and on the following day the Grand Master surrendered. The terms of the surrender included a promise that the French Republic would use its influence to obtain indemnities for the Order at the Congress of Rastadt and to provide the Grand Master with a principality of equal value to that which he was losing. Napoleon remained six days at Malta and then proceeded with the bulk of his forces to Egypt, leaving a garrison of six thousand men on the island.

The Great Standard which, according to the proud boast of the Order had never been lowered to an infidel enemy, was sent to France along with several other valuable objects, in the *Sensible*. The ship was captured by a British frigate, and the flag and the other relics may be seen to-day in the Tower of London.

Though feudal institutions in Malta had been shaken to their foundations towards the end of the Order's government, the people were hardly prepared to accept republican rule as it existed under the French Revolution. The churches were plundered, foreign monks were ordered expelled, ecclesiastical jurisdiction was ended, French was declared the official language, etc. Economic conditions were very bad for there was no work and no trade. General discontent broke into open revolt in September 1798. Bonaparte had just been defeated at the Nile and found that to his surprise the Maltese were able to offer military resistance of no mean order. Nelson established a blockade and recognized the claims of the King of the two Sicilies to the island (based on his being the successor of Charles V in that part of the former kingdom of Aragon). An epidemic carried off thousands on the island, so that though few lives were lost in actual combat, the French were forced to surrender.

In the meantime Grand Master Hompesch had gone to Trieste on leaving Malta, the Emperor of Austria having consented to receive the Order within his dominions. Upon the abdication of Hompesch in 1799, the Emperor Paul I of Russia was proclaimed Grand Master of the Order, though the election was not in accord with the statutes of the Order. The Tsar died in 1801 and his successor, Alexander I, declined the office of Grand Master, though taking the Order under his protection and guaranteeing its privileges, rights, honors, and possessions.

The Treaty of Amiens provided for the restoration of the island of Malta to the Order, Britain entering into this engage-

ment. Moreover the future independence of the island was guaranteed, as was also the Order's sovereignty. France and Britain appointed Ministers Plenipotentiary to the *Order and Island of Malta*. The Grand Master at once began negotiations with Britain for the restoration of the Island in the terms of the treaty. But Sir Alexander John Ball, Baronet, the British governor, declined to turn over the Island to the Order, first on one excuse and then another. It would be necessary, he said, that the British maintain an army there for six years, that they retain possession of the isle of Lampedouze (one of the Malta group), that the French troops should first evacuate Holland, etc. The treaty of Amiens contained none of these provisions and the Grand Master opposed them. Matters dragged along until the rupture of the peace of Amiens in 1803. Always hoping to recover Malta, the Grand Master established the Order successively at Messina, Naples, Catania, and Ferrara. France at length made good her promise to pension former Grand Master Hompesch, but he lived but a short time to enjoy it.

In 1806 Gustavus IV, King of Sweden, offered to transfer the island of Gothland to the Order, but the Sovereign Council was afraid to accept lest so doing would be taken as a renunciation of its rights to Malta. The fall of the French Empire ended the Order's hopes for the recovery of the island, for the first Treaty of Paris, 1814, gave full title to the isle of Malta to His Britannic Majesty.

The see of the Order was finally established in Rome (1834), in the old palace that formerly had been the Order's embassy to the Holy See. Here the Grand Masters have lived ever since and here the Order's affairs are conducted.

When the youthful American Navy undertook its operations against the Barbary pirates in 1801-5, rights in the island of Malta such as had been suggested by the Maltese Chargé d'Affaires in 1794, would have been most helpful. Though the American Marines were able to achieve fame "on the shores of Tripoli," as their song sets forth, the results were not permanent. Had Malta been available as an American base, things might have been different. In truth it was largely the jealousies of the Christian countries which permitted the disgraceful African piracy to continue. France had encouraged the pirates during her rivalry with Spain, and when she had no further need of them, they were supported against her by Britain and the Netherlands. Indeed British politicians of the eighteenth century admitted that Barbary piracy was a useful check on the competition of the weaker Mediterranean nations in the carrying trade. Even Lord Exmouth expressed doubt whether the suppression of piracy would be ac-

ceptable to the trading community. During the Anglo-American War of 1812 the Algerines carried on piracy with all of their old success, and though in 1816 Lord Exmouth and his Dutch allies were able to inflict a severe blow on Algiers and Tunis, it was only in 1830 that the French conquest of the great pirate city of Algiers ended piracy on the "High Barbaree," as the old chantey called it.

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Alone of the chivalric orders founded during the Crusades, the Hospitallers have survived. After more than nine hundred years of continuous existence the Order is, as at the beginning, concerned with the care of the sick and needy in many lands.

In Europe there are several Orders of Saint John, varying somewhat in name, but not connected with the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. Some of these separated themselves from the Sovereign Order on account of religious or political differences. In the order of their existence as separate entities these Orders are:

1. The Knights of Saint John of Prussia (*Johanniterritter*) representing the old Bailliage de Brandenburg of the Hospitallers. At the Reformation, seven of the thirteen commanderies of this *bailliage* adopted protestantism. They nevertheless continued to be considered as pertaining to the Order, until 1810 when King Frederick William III of Prussia confiscated their possessions, somewhat later instituting the *Royal Prussian Order of Saint John*, into which he admitted most of the knights of the former Bailliage of Brandenburg. This is the *Johanniterorden* of which there is a branch in the Netherlands.

2. The Order of Saint John the Baptist of Spain, was formed in 1798 when some of the Spanish knights objected to the election of the Tsar Paul I of Russia as Grand Master as not being in keeping with the Order's statutes. In 1879 the office of Grand Master was reestablished and the Grand Masters were recognized by the Crown of Spain, but even then some knights continued their independence, apparently with the approval of the King. This "Order of Saint John the Baptist" is not recognized by the Sovereign Order and is not to be confused with the Langue of Spain, the branch of the Sovereign Order in that country and of which the King of Spain is one of the Baillis.

3. The Grand Priory of Russia of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem was formed by the Tsar Paul I and admitted knights of the Orthodox Eastern Church. It was detached from the Sovereign Order after the Tsar Alexander I, son of Paul I, declined to accept the office of Grand Master. It existed until the Russian Revolution, but nothing is known of it since that time.

4. In Sweden a branch of the Order was established by the Russian knights and still flourishes. Since it was legally instituted it is not impossible that it may ultimately be recognized by the Sovereign Order.

5. The Grand Priory of England of the Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem. In the late eighteenth century Grand Master de Rohan formed the Anglo-Bavarian *Langue*, designed to include English, Bavarian, and Polish members, but it was not a success. As early as 1814 an attempt was made to revive the English *langue*, the French knights being particularly interested. It was hoped that by taking advantage of the Greek War of Independence that Rhodes might be reconquered for the Order. Negotiations resulted in articles of convention reviving the English *langue*, though final approval of the Sovereign Council was withheld, there being difficulties chiefly due to differences in religion. At length the English aspirants took matters into their own hands and formed the *Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem in England*. This body was without any sanction other than its own, until 1888 when Queen Victoria gave it a Royal Charter. It may therefore now be considered somewhat in the same light as other British orders. It created the *Saint John's Ambulance Association*, later combined with the British Red Cross. There is also in England the *Association of the Sovereign Sacred Military Order of Saint John of Jerusalem*, a branch of the Order of Malta established in 1872.

6. In the United States there are at least three self-constituted bodies known as "Knights of Malta," each independent of the others and having nothing in common except lack of connection past or present with the Sovereign Order of Malta. Such use of an historic name is wholly without justification. Moreover these groups are secret in character, though the Knights of Malta were never secret. These bodies are not to be confused with the *Association of Magistral Knights of Malta of the United States* formed in 1928 by the Sovereign Order. It does not include Knights of Honor and Devotion, i. e. those who have offered the hereditary requirements for membership.

The Sovereign Military Order of Malta to-day has the following branches: The Italian *Langue*, composed of the Grand Priorities of Rome, Lombardy-Venice and the Two Sicilies; the German *Langue*, being the Grand Priory of Bohemia and Austria; the Association of Rhino-Westphalian and Silesian Knights; the Association of British Knights; the Spanish *Langue*; the Association of French Knights; the Association of Portuguese Knights; the Association of Netherlands Knights; the Association of Polish Knights; the Association of Hungarian Knights; the Association

of Magistral Knights of the United States; the Association of Belgian Knights; and the Association of Irish Knights. In addition there are members admitted *in gremio Religionis*, and not belonging to any branch but owing allegiance directly to the Grand Master. By Papal bull, the Grand Masters of the Order have the same rank and precedence as cardinals, and the title Most Eminent Highness. The present Grand Master, the seventy-sixth of the line, is His Most Eminent Highness Prince Chigi della Rovere Albani.

To-day the Order's work is that of the earliest Hospitallers—care of the sick and wounded. Hospitals are maintained in many parts of the world. Moreover the Geneva Convention recognizes the sovereignty of the Order and the humanitarian character of its work with armies in the field in time of war or disaster. The Order's units did valuable work after the Italian earthquakes of 1908 and 1915, and during the World War, particularly with the French, Italian, and the Austro-Hungarian Armies.

So, through sunshine and shadow, the Order of Malta, oldest order of knighthood in the world, has survived and is still a power for good. It is idle to say that the loss of its possession of the island of Malta raised the Order to a loftier plane, one not concerned with material things. The same specious argument was advanced with the loss of the temporal power of the Pope, yet after a time that power was restored, if in modified form. Perhaps one day the Order of Malta will again become sovereign *de facto* as well as *de jure*, for it has outlived many governments and many dynasties. Had the plans discussed by the diplomatic representatives of the Order and of the United States in France at the close of the eighteenth century borne fruit, the Order might have continued its temporal sovereignty, though over lands in the New World.